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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether teachers respond differently to various problem behaviors as a function of student gender. Prospective teachers (N=155) were presented with a description of a male or female student exhibiting either internalizing, externalizing, or solely academic problem behaviors. Participants indicated their likelihood of referring the child to special education on a 100-point scale, their attribution for the child's behavior using the Causal Dimension Scale, and their expectancy for the child s future success using the Generalized Expectancy for Success Scale. Data were analyzed via a series of 2 by 3 analyses of variance. No gender effects were observed. Participants rated students with externalizing behavior problems more negatively on all dependent variables. Students with academic behavior problems were seen as less likely candidates for special education than students with behavior problems, least responsible for their own behavior, and rated as having the highest perceived future expectancy. Results suggest that prospective teachers may have less negative views of academic difficulties since such difficulties are seen to be more within the domain of teacher expertise than are either aggressive behaviors or affective difficulties. (JLS)

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Running head: STUDENT GENDER AND BEHAVIOR AND TEACHER ATTRIBUTIONS

ED 409 299

The Influence of Exceptionality and Gender on Teacher Attributions and Expectancy

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Abstract

Teachers attributions of students' behavior can have a profound effect on the future success of a child (Weiner, 1979). In the present study, 155 prospective teachers were presented with a description of a male or female student exhibiting either internalizing, externalizing, or soley academic problem behaviors. Participants indicated their likelihood of referring the child to special education on a 100 point scale, their attributions for the child's behavior using the Causal Dimension Scale, and their expectancy for the child's future success using the Generalized Expectancy for Success Scale. No gender effects were observed, however, participants rated students with externalizing behavior problems more negatively on all dependent variables. Students with academic behavior problems with academic behavior problems were seen as less likely candidates for special education, least responsible for their behavior, and rated as having the highest perceived future expectancy.

The Influence of Exceptionality and Gender on

Teacher Attributions and Expectancy

Attributions are an individual's explanation for the behavior of another individual or themselves and are typically judged on categories of internality, controllability, and stability, (Weiner, 1979). The effects of teachers' attributions for students' academic performance has been researched extensively and results have demonstrated important consequences for students' academic success (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Weiner, 1979). Weiner (1979) hypothesized the existence of three dimensions that effect attributions: locus, stability, and control. If a teacher considered a student's failure to be stable, then it is probable that they will expect failure in the future as well. For example, if a student fails a math test and the teacher attributes these results to stable causes, then the teacher would expect failure on other math tests. Locus refers to whether the cause is perceived to be internal or external to the individual. If students' behavior or level of success were internally caused, teachers would perceive that little could be done to improve the student's performance. Controllability refers to whether a success or failure is attributable to factors inside or outside the student's control.

Gender has also been found to have an effect on teacher's attributions for student success. Specifically, it has been found that girls tend to demonstrate a helpless pattern of attributions more often than do their male counterparts (Dweck, Davidson, Nelson, & Enna, 1978). In an attempt to explain these findings, Dweck et al. had academic classroom activities observed by blind experimenters for 5 weeks. Results revealed that even though boys received more negative feedback than girls, the majority of these comments related to nonintellectual aspects of their work, such as conduct and effort. However, girls were considered more motivated in their studies. As a result, their negative feedback often related not to effort but to their intelligence. In addition, positive feedback for male students referred to their academic abilities while positive feedback for females often referred to nonacademic aspects of their work, such as neatness. Girls' criticism, therefore, seemed to revolve around internal stable characteristics, while boys' criticism revolved around unstable qualities. While these results do explain the learned helplessness phenomena observed in female students, it does not explain why teacher would treat, and most likely perceive, boys' and girls' behavior differently. Dweck et al. (1978) ruled out differences in boys and girls' behavior to explain these feedback differences. They found that even though boys misbehaved more often than girls, when levels of misconduct were equal, different types of feedback still resulted. Therefore, teachers must attribute success of boys and girls differently.

All of the previously mentioned studies have focused on typical characteristics of children, such as effort, academic success, or gender. However, little has been done to study the effects of children displaying atypical, problem behaviors on teacher attributions and nothing can be found to determine if any differences exist between male and female students with problem behaviors. Medway (1979) compared children referred to a school psychologist with either behavior or learning problems. Results showed that teachers attributed behavior problems more to home influences; a stable, external cause; and learning problems more to student ability; a stable, internal cause. However, most children displayed both learning and behavior disorders, and therefore, other conclusions could not be drawn. In addition, the problem behavior category grouped a wide range of behaviors together; including both internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Therefore, no differentiating between different types of problem behavior occurred. Lewin, Nelson, and Tollefson (1983) found that student behavior is not sufficient to explain teachers' attitudes towards students displaying problem behaviors. They employed an intervention strategy for students displaying behaviors determined by the teacher to be disturbing. Even in situations in which the problem behaviors had been significantly decreased, teachers' perception of students

remained highly stable. Therefore, it can be determined that teachers attribute problem behaviors to stable causes even when they clearly are not. The purpose of the present study was therefore to determine if teachers attribute various problem behaviors of male and female students differentially, to ascertain their likelihood to refer a student for special education, and their expectancy for future nonacademic success for these students.

Method

Participants

Participants were 155 education majors or adolescent development students (87% female) at a large midwestern university. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 52 (M = 22.9, SD = 5.326), and ranged in class standing from sophomores to post graduate students, with 93.6% being juniors and seniors.

Materials

Each participant was presented with a packet describing a student and measures of referral likelihood, expectancy for success and attributions for the student's behavior. One of three problem behaviors was described (academic only, internalizing, or externalizing) for either a male or female student. The academic behavior consisted of a student who lacked motivation in his/her academic work, had poor academic performance, frequently turned in homework late, but had good relations with his or her peers. The internalizing behavior problem was described as withdrawn, shy, passive, performing poorly in academics, and unresponsive to questions asked by either the teacher or his or her peers. The externalizing behavior problem child was described as often losing his/her temper, being angry and resentful, swearing, defying rules, and having poor academic performance.

Following this description, participants were asked to rate, on a 100 point scale, the likelihood that they would refer this student for a special education evaluation had she/he been a student in their classroom. They were then asked to rate their beliefs regarding the student's future success via a modified Generalized Expectancy for Success Scale (GESS) (Fibel & Hale, 1978). This consisted of 12 questions on a 5 point Likert scale asking whether the student would be expected to succeed or fail at a variety of tasks. A high expectancy for success would suggest that the teacher expects the student to achieve his or her future goals. The reliability of the GESS was assessed and was found to be adequate (alpha = .886). Participants also completed a modified Causal Dimensions Scale (CDS) (Russell, 1982); a nine question, 9 point Likert scale measuring the attributional dimensions of locus, stability, and control. Demographic information was also collected and total time for all questionnaires took on average approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Results

Data were analyzed via a series of 2 x 3 analyses of variance with gender (female, male) and presenting behavior (academic, internalizing, externalizing) as independent variables and referral likelihood, expectancy for future success, and attribution for the behavior as dependent variables. No interaction or gender effects were found for any variable. A significant main effect of problem behavior was found for referral likelihood ($f(2,147)=14.77$, $p<.001$), expectancy for success ($f(2,144)=3.38$, $p=.037$), and attribution composite ($f(1,144)=5.69$, $p=.004$). Specifically, tests subsequent to these main effects indicated a lower referral likelihood for the academic group ($M=52.31$) than either the internalizinng ($M=67.62$) or extenalizing ($M=77.65$) groups. With regard to expectancy for success, students displaying internalizing problem behaviors were rated as more likely to achieve success in the future ($M=40.67$) than students with externalizing behavior problems ($M=36.67$), while the academic only group ($M=39.56$) did not differ significantly from either. Attributionally, using the sum of the three attributional dimensions indicated participants were more likely

to make high responsibility attributions to children displaying externalizing behaviors (M=60.42) than for students with only academic problems (M=54.54). Ratings for students with internalizing behaviors (M=56.82) did not differ from either.

Scores on the CDS were also analyzed separately for the locus, stability, and controllability dimensions. Results were similar in direction to the combined CDS score with no interaction or gender effects being observed for any dimension. The main effect of behavior problem for stability ($f(2,145)=3.62$, $p=.029$) and controllability ($f(2,145)=3.50$, $p=.033$), but not for locus ($f(2,145)=1.17$, $p=.890$). Specifically, participants rated students demonstrating both the internalizing (M=10.66) and externalizing problem behaviors (M=10.92) as being more stable than the academic only problem behavior (M=8.94) and the externalizing behavior problem (M=16.64) as being more controllable than the internalizing behavior problem (M=14.66).

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to determine if teachers respond differentially to various problem behaviors as a function of gender. It was hypothesized that female students displaying externalizing behavior problems and male students with internalizing behavior problems would be more likely to be referred to a school psychologist, receive greater responsibility attributions, and be rated with a lower expectancy for success than would students displaying more gender stereotypical behavior problems or only academic problems. Results failed to support the existence of any gender effects. Results do suggest, however, that prospective teachers view different types of problem behaviors seen in the classroom differentially. Specifically, children exhibiting externalizing behavior problems are seen as more responsible for their actions, as having a lower likelihood to succeed in the future, and as better candidates for special education than students exhibiting internalizing behavior problems or purely academic problems. If, as previous research suggests, attributions and expectancies influence behavior, students exhibiting externalizing behavior problems may be given less opportunity to succeed in the classroom because of teacher behavior which may develop based on their expectations regarding student behavior.

Teachers attitudes and attributions regarding student behavior and expectations are important to consider in all aspects of school psychology practice. Referral is the first step taken toward a child's placement in special education. Research suggests that diagnostic decisions are largely based on referral information, even in light of nonconfirming test data (Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1981). This is alarming in light of survey results which indicate approximately 92% of all referrals are evaluated and approximately 73% of those referred are ultimately placed in special education (Algozzine, Ysseldyke, & Christenson, 1983).

It is not surprising that teachers are more likely to refer students with internalizing or externalizing behavior problems than those with only academic difficulties. Academic difficulties may be seen as more within the domain of their expertise than either aggressive behaviors or affectual difficulties. Their attributions indicating that participants view internalizing and externalizing behavior problems as more stable than an academic problem and externalizing behavior problems are more controllable than internalizing behavior problems may suggest that teachers may not be as tolerant in dealing with certain students. This is also illustrated by participants prediction of lower expectancy for future success for the student described with an externalizing problem. This may influence their responses to interviews, behavior rating scales, etc. during the assessment process and the treatment integrity of interventions developed during consultation. While additional research is needed to further investigate what effects may accrue from differential attributions and expectations, it may be wise to consider these factors in assessment and consultation.

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